

PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION TO SPOUSAL LOSS IN OLD AGE THE ROLE OF PERSONALITY

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Background & Aims

- Spousal bereavement is a normative transition in old age – especially in women – but also known as one of the **most stressful life events**.
 - Numerous studies have shown the **detrimental impact** of widowhood on individual's **psychological, social, physical, and economical well-being**.
 - However there are huge **interindividual differences** in adaptation. Referring to the diathesis-stress perspective **personal and contextual factors are assumed to modify the consequences** of bereavement.
 - **Personality might contribute** to psychological adaptation, however **research results are still scarce and inconsistent**.
- The aims of this study are therefore to test
- the **negative effect of spousal loss** on three distinct indicators of psychological adaptation – **depression, loneliness and life satisfaction**.
 - whether the effects on psychological adaptation are moderated by the personality traits** extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience.

Method

- Cross-sectional data of the project 'Vulnerability and growth: Developmental dynamics and differential effects of the loss of an intimate partner in the second life half', which is part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: life course perspectives' (Swiss National Science Foundation).
- Instruments:**
Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985; Cronbach's α .86); **Loneliness Scales** (De Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985; Cronbach's α .84); **Center Epid. Stud. Depression Scale (CES-D)** (Radloff, 1977; Cronbach's α .84); **Big Five Inventory (BFI-10)** (Rammstedt & John, 2007)
- Sample:**
Widowed age 60-89 ($M = 74.37$; $SD = 7.14$); 224 women/169 men; widowed within the last 5 years; married on average 45.43 years ($SD = 8.42$)
Married controls age 60-89 ($M = 73.58$; $SD = 8.09$); 310 women/314 men; no spousal loss by divorce or death; married on average 47.35 years ($SD = 8.51$)

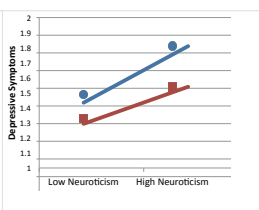
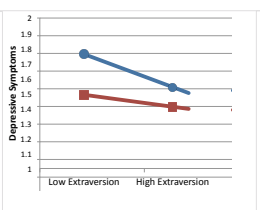
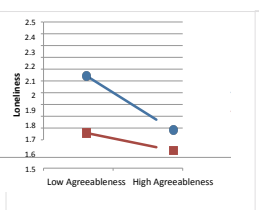
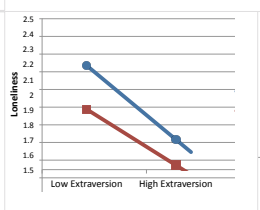
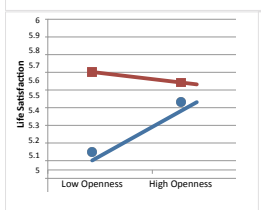
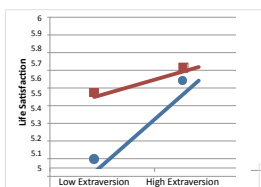
Results

	Widowed <i>M (SD)</i>	Married <i>M (SD)</i>
Life Satisfaction (1-7)	5.34 (0.95)	5.61 (0.79)
Loneliness (1-5)	1.91 (0.79)	1.68 (0.63)
Depression (1-4)	1.63 (0.43)	1.43 (0.34)

*** $p < .001$

	Life Satisfaction					Loneliness					Depressive symptoms				
	E	N	A	C	O	E	N	A	C	O	E	N	A	C	O
Age	.03	.04	.02	.02	.03	.02	.02	.04	.04	.03	.09*	.08**	.09**	.10**	.09*
Gender (1 'female')	-.06	-.02	-.07*	-.06	-.07*	-.05	-.09**	-.05	-.06*	-.05	.09*	.04	.09*	.09*	.09*
Educational (1 'primary school' to 6 'university')	.07*	.07*	.08*	.09*	.06	-.02	-.01	-.02	-.05	-.01	-.05	-.03	-.05	-.06	-.04
Widowhood (1 'widowed', 2 'married')	.51***	.04	.08	.10	.55***	-.38***	-.03	-.52**	.08	-.30*	-.53***	.03	-.42*	-.52*	-.42**
Extraversion	.55***					-.48***					-.44***				
Widowhood x Extraversion	-.52***					.32**					.40**				
Neuroticism		-.36***					.39***					.71***			
Widowhood x Neuroticism		.20					-.24					-.45**			
Agreeableness			.08				-.40**						-.23		
Widowhood x Agreeableness			.10				.41*						.19		
Conscientiousness				.12				-.06						-.30*	
Widowhood x Conscientiousness				.05				-.28						.34	
Openness					.43***					-.19					-.23*
Widowhood x Openness					-.53**					.17					.23*
Adjusted R^2	.07	.08	.05	.05	.05	.10	.08	.05	.06	.04	.11	.23	.09	.11	.09

Standardized coefficients (B) are reported. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .06$.



Discussion

- Group comparisons reveal that widowed individuals show lower life satisfaction, higher loneliness and higher depression compared to their married peers. Multiple linear regression models considering socio-demographic characteristics and two-way interaction terms of civil status and personality traits show that the negative effect of spousal bereavement on psychological adaptation varies significantly based on one's personality traits:
- The negative effect of spousal bereavement on life satisfaction differs significantly based on one's level of extraversion and openness to experience.
 - The effect of spousal bereavement on loneliness is moderated by extraversion and agreeableness.
 - The effect of spousal bereavement on depressive symptoms is moderated by extraversion and neuroticism.

Our results reveal the centrality of personality factors for explaining the negative effects of spousal bereavement on adaptation. High extraversion, low neuroticism, high agreeableness and high openness to experience are potential protective resources for psychological adaptation to spousal loss in old age. The assumption that differences in adaptation are related to differences in personality dimensions could be confirmed.